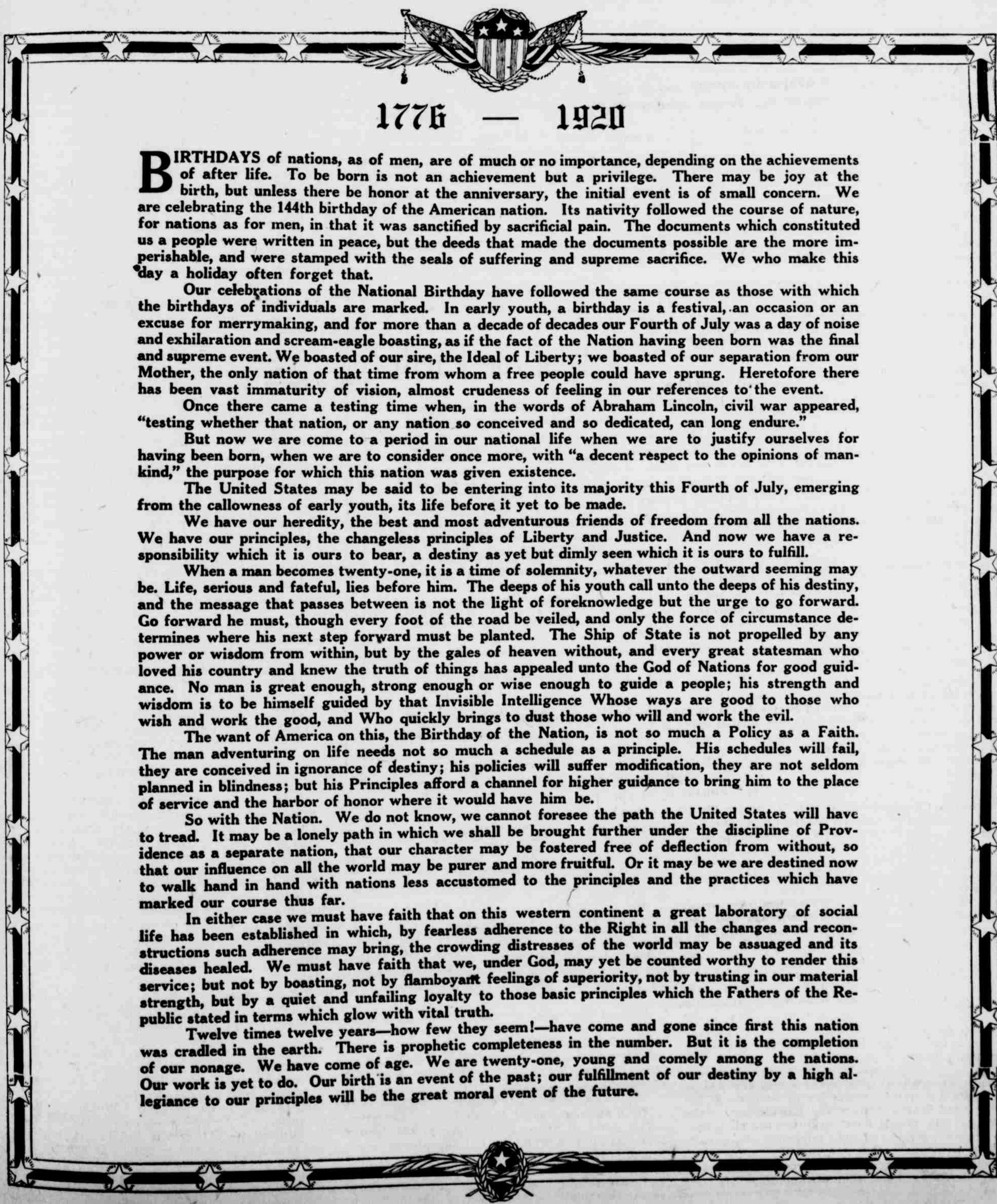


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BIRTHDAYS of nations, as of men, are of much or no importance, depending on the achievements of after life. To be born is not an achievement but a privilege. There may be joy at the birth, but unless there be honor at the anniversary, the initial event is of small concern. We are celebrating the 144th birthday of the American nation. Its nativity followed the course of nature, for nations as for men, in that it was sanctified by sacrificial pain. The documents which constituted us a people were written in peace, but the deeds that made the documents possible are the more imperishable, and were stamped with the seals of suffering and supreme sacrifice. We who make this day a holiday often forget that.

Our celebrations of the National Birthday have followed the same course as those with which the birthdays of individuals are marked. In early youth, a birthday is a festival, an occasion or an excuse for merrymaking, and for more than a decade of decades our Fourth of July was a day of noise and exhilaration and scream-eagle boasting, as if the fact of the Nation having been born was the final and supreme event. We boasted of our sire, the Ideal of Liberty; we boasted of our separation from our Mother, the only nation of that time from whom a free people could have sprung. Heretofore there has been vast immaturity of vision, almost crudeness of feeling in our references to the event.

Once there came a testing time when, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, civil war appeared, "testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."

But now we are come to a period in our national life when we are to justify ourselves for having been born, when we are to consider once more, with "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind," the purpose for which this nation was given existence.

The United States may be said to be entering into its majority this Fourth of July, emerging from the callowness of early youth, its life before it yet to be made.

We have our heredity, the best and most adventurous friends of freedom from all the nations. We have our principles, the changeless principles of Liberty and Justice. And now we have a responsibility which it is ours to bear, a destiny as yet but dimly seen which it is ours to fulfill.

When a man becomes twenty-one, it is a time of solemnity, whatever the outward seeming may be. Life, serious and fateful, lies before him. The deeps of his youth call unto the deeps of his destiny, and the message that passes between is not the light of foreknowledge but the urge to go forward. Go forward he must, though every foot of the road be veiled, and only the force of circumstance determines where his next step forward must be planted. The Ship of State is not propelled by any power or wisdom from within, but by the gales of heaven without, and every great statesman who loved his country and knew the truth of things has appealed unto the God of Nations for good guidance. No man is great enough, strong enough or wise enough to guide a people; his strength and wisdom is to be himself guided by that Invisible Intelligence Whose ways are good to those who wish and work the good, and Who quickly brings to dust those who will and work the evil.

The want of America on this, the Birthday of the Nation, is not so much a Policy as a Faith. The man adventuring on life needs not so much a schedule as a principle. His schedules will fail, they are conceived in ignorance of destiny; his policies will suffer modification, they are not seldom planned in blindness; but his Principles afford a channel for higher guidance to bring him to the place of service and the harbor of honor where it would have him be.

So with the Nation. We do not know, we cannot foresee the path the United States will have to tread. It may be a lonely path in which we shall be brought further under the discipline of Providence as a separate nation, that our character may be fostered free of deflection from without, so that our influence on all the world may be purer and more fruitful. Or it may be we are destined now to walk hand in hand with nations less accustomed to the principles and the practices which have marked our course thus far.

In either case we must have faith that on this western continent a great laboratory of social life has been established in which, by fearless adherence to the Right in all the changes and reconstructions such adherence may bring, the crowding distresses of the world may be assuaged and its diseases healed. We must have faith that we, under God, may yet be counted worthy to render this service; but not by boasting, not by flamboyant feelings of superiority, not by trusting in our material strength, but by a quiet and unfailing loyalty to those basic principles which the Fathers of the Republic stated in terms which glow with vital truth.

Twelve times twelve years—how few they seem!—have come and gone since first this nation was cradled in the earth. There is prophetic completeness in the number. But it is the completion of our nonage. We have come of age. We are twenty-one, young and comely among the nations. Our work is yet to do. Our birth is an event of the past; our fulfillment of our destiny by a high allegiance to our principles will be the great moral event of the future.